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Reflections on Student Assessment in Further & Higher Education

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to initiate discussion on student assessment and related issues which we, as lecturers, face in further and higher education. A basic concept of learning is that in order for students to learn at a higher level, they must possess a good understanding of the basic fundamentals of their subject area. Many programmes in further and higher education are designed so that students build upon their existing level of knowledge year on year; thereby, students need to ensure they have a good grasp of the prerequisites to help facilitate a smooth transition to the next level.

The main purpose of assessment is for lecturers to know if learning has taken place. Summative assessment has traditionally used lectures, textbooks and journals as the primary learning resources; however, dramatic advances in technology have seen a tendency for many students to over rely on the use of the Internet. Students now live in a world of instant gratification whereby, for many, when they want information, they want it now. Consequently, whilst the use of the Internet has many advantages, it is a contributing factor to the “copy and paste” culture and plagiarism. Another problem is that although students who do utilise a breadth of resources, they sometimes have an inability to show the depth of their understanding of the subject area. In practice, this means that there may be little correlation between the grade awarded in a piece of coursework and the true level of knowledge and

understanding of the student which could be assessed by alternative means. Therefore, lecturers must be encouraged to reflect on their current methods of assessment and show innovation in the way assessment is approached to encourage deeper understanding by the student rather than the student's ability to collate information, referenced or otherwise.

Keywords: Assessment, innovation, plagiarism, reflection.

1 Introduction

For many years now, programmes such as BTEC National Diplomas and Higher National Diplomas in colleges of further education have acted as progression routes to higher education. One of the main advantages to students of BTECs is that the majority of assessment is coursework based – they are marketed as having “*no exam pressure*” (Edexcel, 2009). Another advantage is that once the students progress to university, they are familiar with the work ethos of preparing written coursework through assignments. This is also beneficial to university lecturers although, at university, a combination of coursework and examinations is used.

Although there are many advantages to using coursework as an assessment method, there are also problems associated with it. The rise in plagiarism has led to many institutions attempting to address the problem. This has included increasing awareness about what constitutes plagiarism, offering specialist study skills sessions on referencing and providing additional resources on their Virtual Learning Environments. All institutions of education in the UK have specialist software for detecting plagiarism such as Turnitin (Plagiarism Advice, 2009). However, how incidents of plagiarism are dealt with and the sanctions imposed on students vary between educational institutions.

For those of us lecturing in further and higher education, it is important to consider how we currently assess students and establish whether or not our methods are a true reflection of student learning as opposed to their ability to “copy and paste”. A survey conducted by N-Learning (2004) found that 97%

of higher education institutions felt that plagiarism was a significant issue. The discipline of engineering often involves groups of individuals working together and so this group work is encouraged on many engineering programmes which itself presents problems regarding plagiarism (Bjork, 2009). In science and engineering, it is common for the assessment of a module to consist of two pieces of coursework and an exam (Palmer, 2004). The Higher Education Authority (2009) encourages lecturers to seek alternative forms of assessment which can include, for example, the use of Podcasts. Other alternative methods include simulation, oral presentations, posters, group work, making a media clip/video, demonstration, self assessment and peer assessment.

2 The body of the paper

The word *assessment* relates to getting to know our students and the quality of their learning (Rowntree, 1977). The purpose of assessment is to “*let teachers know what pupils know, understand and can do*” (DENI, 2005, p.2.). As lecturers, we use assessment to gather evidence of performance to put a measure on learning, make judgements on students and grade them individually. The proper assessment of students involves understanding how their various strengths and weaknesses contribute to what they know and in relation to their potential as learners (Ramsden, 2003). However, to be effective, assessment needs to be valid, fair and reliable (Fry *et al.*, 2003).

The importance of quality and appropriate assessment and feedback are one of the key features of good teachers as perceived by students in the works of Marsh (1987). As a result of Special Educational Needs and Disability Order (SENDO) requirements being placed on education providers to provide fair and equitable services to all students, more emphasis is being placed on the whole issue of student assessment (Fry *et al.*, 2003).

There are a number of functions of assessment; four of which have been identified by Fry *et al.* (2003) as *diagnosis, selection, feedback* and *evaluation*.

Assessment can be divided into two methods of assessment - *formative* and *summative* (William & Black, 1996). Bloom (1971) was the first to use the term summative assessment which we, as lecturers, use after learning has taken place at the end of modules, semesters or at the end of a course in order to judge the extent of student learning in a course.

Formative assessment provides information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities and is regarded as being important in the process of learning and, in particular, deep learning (Black & William, 1998; Rushton, 2005). Initial assessments can be used for a benchmark for any formative assessments that will follow. They can also be used to construct individual learning programs for each student. Formative assessment is an on-going process that takes place during the learning process and gives lecturers the opportunity to form judgements on student progress.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to each method of assessment and the method used should be used appropriately according to the learning outcomes of the lecture. A report by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education in England and Northern Ireland concluded that a narrow range of methods of assessment exist and there is an over-reliance on traditional methods of assessment (QAA, 2003). Self assessment and peer assessment are two methods of assessment which are growing in popularity. They will now be discussed further.

Self Assessment and Peer Assessment

Self-assessment is becoming a widely recognised assessment technique, especially when used in the assessment of adults (Reece & Walker, 2003). It has been deemed beneficial in encouraging learners to be more reflective and self-critical and is also provides instant feedback (Cowan, 1988). However, learners may not be adequately experienced to conduct the assessment. Also, not all learners may want to participate in self-assessment and, for those who do, they may over or under value their performance

Peer assessment is defined as “*assessment by fellow (peer) students, as in peer assessment of team activities*” (Reece & Walker, 2003, p.438). It has been used to ensure quality assurances that time devoted to teaching is well organised and well spent (Reece & Walker, 2003). Both self and peer assessment can take many forms depending on a number of factors. Peer assessment involves giving assessment and receiving assessment.

Peer assessment can be used in a wide range of styles and purposes – informal and formal; qualitative and quantitative; formative and summative. Peer assessment by students can allow them a greater feeling of ownership of the assessment process and it can make the learning process more effective (Ellington *et al.*, 1997). Students can increase their knowledge and skill base and may become more aware of learning outcomes. However, this method may not be appropriate if the experience of the peers is low or there are poor working relationships.

One positive example of peer assessment being used with undergraduates is at University of Southampton (Lakomy & Price, 2004). The students were allowed to submit a draft of their essay to the JISC plagiarism service for feedback before a final submission was made for marking. The draft was also peer reviewed with students giving each other feedback before the final submission. This helped to eliminate ‘problem text’ before they made their final submission.

Conclusion

Craddock & Mathias (2009) conclude that although the introduction of assessment options may be time consuming, the benefits of a student-centred approach to assessment may be very beneficial, especially for those students who have dyslexia. There are many benefits of using a variety of assessment methods but they are largely dependent on the situation, those who are being assessed, their individual learning style and those who are doing the assessing. The question is – *do we endeavour to involve students in choosing the assessment method?*

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